

**Testimony to the Mayor of the District of Columbia from the
State Advisory Panel on Special Education
on the
District of Columbia Public Schools Budget
February 16, 2006**

Good evening. I am Senora Simpson, presenting testimony on behalf of the State Advisory Panel on Special Education.

As you know, State Advisory Panels are required by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and, in District of Columbia, the Panel is appointed by the Mayor. By law, the Panel is composed of a majority of parents of students with disabilities or individuals with disabilities as well as representatives of public and private agencies who serve the needs of children with disabilities. The responsibilities of the State Advisory Panel are to:

- Advise the State Education Agency (SEA), the DC Board of Education and DC Public Schools of unmet needs within the state in the education of children with disabilities.
- Comment publicly on any rules or regulations proposed by the state regarding the education of children with disabilities.
- Advise the SEA in developing evaluations and reporting on data to the Secretary of Education.
- Advise the SEA in developing corrective action plans to address findings identified in federal monitoring reports.
- Advise the SEA in developing and implementing policies relating to the coordination of services for children with disabilities.

I appear before you today to provide information on the priorities of the Panel and suggest places where we believe budget resources need to be targeted to address these priorities. Since the Panel has not had the chance to weigh the budget implications (or tradeoffs) of the recommendations included at the end of this testimony, we would like these issues considered in the mix as the Board of Education and Superintendent weigh Special Education program priorities in this budget.

Since July 2005, the Panel has met to discuss a variety of issues relating to our charge and will produce an annual report by July 2006 reflective of these issues.

Many of our concerns involve the need for advising the SEA and other stakeholders on effective policies to ensure that our children are well served. Among the concerns echoed by Panelists are for:

- Changing the existing culture of schools and systems to one of responsibility for providing quality education and services for all children—not as a matter of compliance, but as a reflection of our government's commitment to serving our residents well, including our most fragile and most at-risk.

- Implementing policies that (a) recognize the over identification of students for special education and the underlying causes, and that (b) address these problems at the respective levels of responsibility—the classroom, school, LEA and SEA levels.
- Building intervention services, before problems kick in, such as the services provided by the Department of Mental Health in schools which in turn show reductions in the number of students going into special education, or experiencing disciplinary actions and suspensions.
- Helping to minimize the need for the complaint process by ensuring quality general education, better lines of communication between the school and the parent before it is IEP time, and once determined necessary, providing appropriate and timely Individual Education Plans, including plans for transitioning students from school to postsecondary and adult pursuits.

We know that systemic problems must be addressed in areas involving:

- Teacher training and certification--making special education a part of special subjects for teacher recertification.
- Effective professional development for school leaders, staff and school leadership teams (around effective models of inclusion) and for regular and special education teachers (on how to provide services within the classroom); as well as mentors for new teachers.
- School accountability for positive outcomes for all students, as well as District or LEA accountability for results, including minimizing spending on special education because of unobserved technicalities and failure to follow the rules.
- Coordination between regular and special education and between education and related services.
- Oversight of children in private placement and the programs/schools in which they are placed.

Progress is beginning to be apparent in areas of assistive technology and services (e.g., speech and language, vision-impaired), state enforcement and investigation, responsive call centers, and transportation. Still, there is more work to be done and areas for improvement. Many children are not being assessed and therefore, not receiving needed services. There is not enough staff to test them and meaningful evaluations are needed that track the child's growth and development. IEP implementation continues to be inconsistent across the system as is follow-through on the part of hearing officers. Transportation still needs improvement and transition services continue to be weak.

Generally speaking, there is improved commitment from the Board of Education and DCPS leadership—both the local education and the state education agency—to change and reform, to build internal capacity, to establish efficiencies where they did not exist before, and to establish a better record of improved education and services. There is also general awareness of special

education issues among the general public and recognition of the urgency and importance of improvements in this area if all of our young people are to be appropriately served.

We are encouraged by the Superintendent's *Declaration of Education* (2005) which offered as a major priority: "Getting special education costs under control while simultaneously providing an effective and efficient continuum of evidence-based programs . . ." (p. 17)

That document indicated the need for:

- professional development to prepare principals, special and general educators to welcome the inclusion of 200-400 students which DCPS anticipates will be returned to and served in their neighborhood schools; and
- intervention coaches to provide prevention and intervention services as soon as students begin to fall behind on DCPS grade level standards, or have behavior issues interfering with learning.

We have reviewed the report of the Council of the Great City Schools (*Review of the Budget and Financial Operations of the District of Columbia Public Schools*, February 2006) related to disproportionate funds budgeted per pupil on special education in DC Public Schools (\$3,699 vs. \$1,084 in the average big city school district)¹ and the fact that special education constituted about 25.4 percent of the school district's total expenditures, compared with about 12.2 percent in the average urban school district.

We applaud the Board of Education's Ad Hoc Committee on Special Education (*Ad Hoc Committee on Special Education White Paper*, January 13, 2006) for its attempt to expose and address many of the root causes of the high costs related to the provision of special education and to return many services to local schools and neighborhoods. We concur that "Special education costs and cost overruns significantly impact the public school system's budget and put general education for all children at risk" (p. 10). With the sustained commitment to providing high quality services to all children and youth, dedicated oversight and accountability for results, and the funds needed to initiate these new approaches while discontinuing old, ineffective ones, the system may be able to right size its priorities and appropriately align public funds with the our expectations for a quality education for all children and youth.

We applaud any budget that supports and implements professional development for regular and special education teachers in methods of differentiated instruction and inclusion; that creates model schools to support student learning in the least restrictive environments; that provides research-based programs and interventions to improve academic and behavioral outcomes; and that provides assessments and appropriate special education services in a timely way. Whereas this direction was made clear in the *Declaration of Education*, we hope to see it expanded upon in the Master Education Plan. Also we can only hope that the statement made in the FY 2007

¹ "Special education includes costs for special education teachers, paraprofessionals, clinical staff and clerical personnel assigned to work with students classified as eligible for special education services, as well as services contracted to outside agencies or private schools to which the district sends special education students. The category excludes all costs for transporting special education students . . . and the costs for principals, office support, and custodians at special education schools and centers." (Council of Great City Schools, 2006, p. 53)

Proposed Budget Board Presentation, *Keeping our Promise to the District's Children* (February 14, 2006, p. 11) "of concentrating system resources into fewer schools" and rightsizing staff through the "reintegration of Special Ed Centers . . . into home schools (p. 15)" will also result in richer programming, not poorer, and appropriate, not limited, staffing for children with special needs.

We eagerly await the presentation of the Superintendent's Master Education Plan and the Master Facilities plan to appropriately gauge their impact on children and youth with special needs as well as their cost. In the meantime, the State Advisory Panel on Special Education encourages public support for:

- Comprehensive school-based health centers in schools so that students with disabilities can receive many of the related services they need.
- Neighborhood and community-based Parent Resource Centers to empower and inform all parents, including parents of children with special needs.
- Early intervention and prevention, including intensive interventions for literacy.
- Professional development for teachers and school leaders to ensure that students of varying learning styles and disabilities can succeed and receive the supports they need.
- Services for special populations of youth, including incarcerated young people.

Thank you and I am also submitting the written testimony of State Advisory Panel member, Brenda Brown for your consideration.